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Donald Davidson's Account of Conceptual Schemes as Related to Inter-Lingual Translation

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Abstract

In his address “On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme,” Donald Davidson puts forth the notion of varying conceptual schemes. The variation makes relative the notions of truth and concept. Davidson argues against varying conceptual schemes via the construction of a system of translation between different languages. I argue that Davidson’s system, adapted from Tarski’s Convention T, is inconsistent with the requirements of the formal structure Convention T brings. In particular, it is shown that Davidson fails to uniformly apply his notion of what it means to understand a language. Furthermore, it is shown that Davidson’s adaptation of Convention T fails to grasp the heart of Convention T: the removal of the Liar’s Paradox. While these problems disappear upon the repeal of one of Davidson’s assumptions, the cost of the repeal appears to be the loss of a working system.

In his address “On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme,” Donald Davidson puts forth the notion of varying conceptual schemes. The variation makes relative the notions of truth and concept. Davidson argues against varying conceptual schemes via the construction of a system of translation between different languages. I argue that Davidson’s system, adapted from Tarski’s Convention T, is inconsistent with the requirements of the formal structure Convention T brings. In particular, it is shown that Davidson fails to uniformly apply his notion of what it means to understand a language. Furthermore, it is shown that Davidson’s adaptation of Convention T fails to grasp the heart of Convention T: the removal of the Liar’s Paradox. While these problems disappear upon the repeal of one of Davidson’s assumptions, the cost of the repeal appears to be the loss of a working system.

The argument begins by taking note of Davidson’s understanding of the connections between language and conceptual scheme. In order to show there is a single conceptual scheme Davidson sets out to show that all languages are mutually translatable. The problem of translation brings Tarski’s Convention T to the forefront due to the relations it provides between languages. Davidson adapts Convention T for the purpose of translation utilizing a metalanguage as a means to translate between two lower order

languages. Davidson then localizes the notion of truth to a point where a logical equivalence between two statements implies that the two statements translate into one another. Davidson then mistakenly identifies the subject language and the metalanguage in his Convention T style translation attempt. The identification leads to a paradox concerning the capacity to speak a language: the speaker of a language is shown to not have the capacity to speak that language while one who does not have the capacity is shown to have that capacity. Further, the identification of languages leads to the recovery of the Liar's Paradox via iterated translation between two languages.

Davidson understands languages to have an intricate connection with conceptual schemes. Davidson believes that different conceptual schemes necessarily yield different languages ("On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme," 6). Davidson does not, however, claim that differing languages are sufficient evidence for the necessitation of varying conceptual schemes. Davidson believes that "speakers of different languages may share a conceptual scheme provided there is a way of translating one language into the other" ("On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme," 6). Davidson's task is to identify which languages can fall under a common conceptual scheme. If he can succeed in identifying all languages with one another, Davidson will show that all experience thus far has been contained within a single conceptual scheme. Davidson encounters the problem of finding a systematic way of translating statements between two languages.

Davidson turns to Alfred Tarski's work with truth, in particular to Tarski's attempt at removing semantic paradoxes from language. One such paradox, the Liar's Paradox, is found in the attempt to evaluate the verity of the statement: "This statement is false." In his essay "The Semantic Conception of Truth and the Foundations of Semantics," Tarski proposes a method, known as Convention T, for the removal of the Liar's Paradox. Convention T relies on the study of languages which are not "semantically closed," meaning that the language does not contain "in addition to its expressions, also the names of these expressions, as well as semantic terms such as the term '*true*' referring to sentences of this language" ("The Semantic Conception of Truth" 124-125). Tarski does not permit languages in which the verity of statements of the same language can be discussed.

Given the requirement of the utilization of such regimented languages, statements pertaining to the truth of other statements necessarily involve at least two languages. Tarski defines the object language to be "the language which is 'talked about,'" and defines the meta-language as "the language in which we 'talk about' the [object language]" ("The Semantic Conception of Truth" 125). Given these distinctions between languages, Tarski proposes Convention T:

“(T) *X is true if, and only if, p,*”

where “the symbol ‘*p*’ in (T) stands for an arbitrary sentence of our object-language” and “the symbol ‘*X*’ in (T) represents the name of the sentence for which ‘*p*’ stands” (“The Semantic Conception of Truth” 126). The idea is that, within the metalanguage, a statement of the object language, as referenced in the metalanguage by its name, is claimed to be true if, and only if, that statement of the object language or, equivalently, a translation of the statement of the object language into the metalanguage, is true (“The Semantic Conception of Truth” 126). In crude terms, the notion of the truth of a statement (and hence the capacity to discuss the verity of a statement of a language within that same language) is taken out of the language in which the statement is made, and is given to a ‘God-like’ metalanguage which has the capacity to speak of the truth of the statements of this ‘lower’ object language.

Davidson recognizes Tarski’s relation between the truth of a statement and its translation into another language. Indeed, Davidson states that Convention T “succeeds... by making essential use of the notion of translation into a language we know” (“On the Very idea of a Conceptual Scheme,” 17). Davidson sees potential to utilize Tarski’s Convention T to relate two statements in order to claim they have equivalent meanings, thus bridging the gap between the two languages. Davidson trades Tarski’s language dichotomy for a trichotomy: “the object language, the subject language, and the metalanguage,” which are “the languages from and into which translation proceeds, and the language of the theory, which says what expressions of the subject language translate which expressions of the object language” (“Radical Interpretation,” 129). A Convention T style sentence within Davidson’s scheme is:

(T*) *s_o is true if, and only if, s_s is true*

where the symbol ‘*s_o*’ denotes a statement in the object language and the symbol ‘*s_s*’ denotes a statement in the subject language. The words in (T*) connecting the symbols are words of the metalanguage (that is to say, (T*) is a statement in the metalanguage). With this structure, Davidson is able to relate two statements of different languages via logical equivalence.

Davidson recognizes, however, that replacement *salva veritate* is not sufficient to demonstrate the equivalence of meaning. Davidson offers, as an example, the statement that:

“(S) ‘Snow is white’ is true if and only if grass is green” (“Truth and Meaning,” 312).

Statement (S) shows that just because two statements are logically equivalent, identical meanings are not necessitated. It is here that Davidson’s notion of truth as a property of a system of beliefs comes into play. Davidson believes that “determinate meanings”

cannot exist within a language (“A Coherence Theory of Truth and Knowledge” 145). A lack of fixed meanings necessitates the contextualization of meaning into a system. The truth of a statement is therefore dependent upon what the speaker meant by the statement when it was made. Davidson states that “it is simplest just to view truth as a relation between a sentence, a person, and a time” (“Truth and Meaning” 319). With this notion of truth applied to (T*), we arrive at:

(T**) s_o is true for p_o at time t_o if, and only if, s_s is true for p_s at time t_s ,

where the symbol ‘ s_o ’ denotes a statement in the object language, ‘ p_o ’ the speaker of the object language, ‘ t_o ’ the time at which s_o was made, and similarly for the other symbols as the corresponding statement, speaker, and time for the subject language. Again, the words in (T**) connecting the symbols are words of the metalanguage (that is to say, (T**) is a statement in the metalanguage).

Davidson’s contextualization of truth appears to solve the problem of statement (S). Truth is placed into the context of a situation, an environment. Davidson states that “the interpreter interprets sentences held true... according to the events and objects in the outside world that cause the sentence to be held true” (“A Coherence Theory of Truth and Knowledge,” 150). If the interpreter has access to the environment in which the speaker of the foreign tongue is located, the interpreter has the capacity to rule out statements such as (S) because the environmental clues speak against such interpretations. In the particular case of (S), one would not remark on the whiteness of snow if it is a warm spring day, an environment in which one is likely to comment about the grass. The contextualization of truth thus limits the possibilities of (T**) to the extent that Davidson believes a construction such as (T**) is sufficient for interlingual interpretation.

It is within the formalization of the process of environmental appeal into system that proves to be problematic. The first step in the formalization process is the identification of the metalanguage and the subject language. Davidson states that, “The only expressions a theory of interpretation has to mention are those belonging to the language to be interpreted” (“Radical Interpretation,” 130). That is to say, any interpreter using the theory of interpretation must understand the language of the theory. Given this, in an attempt to interpret, the interpreter must understand the subject language, that language which is his own, and the metalanguage, the language of the system. Davidson is brought to the conclusion that “the reference to the home language is superfluous” (“Radical Interpretation,” 130). The identification of the metalanguage and the subject language gives the speaker of the subject language the capacity to discuss the verity of statements of the object language. This discussion is carried out via statements of the form (T**), now to be understood as statements in the subject language and therefore called (T**)s statements.

The identification of languages proves to be problematic. Davidson claims that for one “to know what it is for a sentence – any sentence – to be true... amounts... to understanding the language” (“Truth and Meaning,” 310). This means that the speaker of a language must be able to determine the verity of a statement of that same language. $(T^{**})_s$ statements are statements in the subject language and thus, if the speaker of the subject language is taken to understand the subject language, the speaker must be able to determine the verity of $(T^{**})_s$ statements. But the verity of $(T^{**})_s$ is taken to be the repeated coincidence of statement with environmental state. The problem is that a speaker of the subject language, if he is to be taken to understand the subject language, would be required to be able to determine the verity of $(T^{**})_s$ statements, an impossibility if the speaker has not encountered the appropriate experiences.

Allowing that the speaker of the subject language does not know the verity of $(T^{**})_s$ statements, the speaker needs a way to determine the truth value. Said differently, the speaker of the subject language needs a way in which to determine if he has given a correct interpretation of a statement in the alien tongue. Davidson accomplishes this via adopting “*prompted assent* as basic” (“A Coherence Theory of Truth and Knowledge,” 147). The speaker of the subject language would attempt to make a true claim in the object language, a claim which the speaker of the object language could confirm or deny. This is to say that Davidson allows the speaker of the object language the power to determine the verity of $(T^{**})_s$ statements. But again, if Davidson’s understanding of truth and its relation to understanding a language is taken seriously, then this presupposes that the speaker of the object language already understands the subject language.

The tension which presents itself for Davidson is the understanding of what it means to speak a language. While Davidson is interested in the translation of natural languages, he has elected to couch his theory within a formal system of language relations. This system is designed to create a hierarchy of languages as a way of determining which languages are permitted to discuss which other languages. Davidson’s equating of the meaning of a statement with his contextualized notion of truth of that very statement makes it such that for one to understand (and thus speak) a language, one must know the truth value of each statement. Davidson cannot, however, utilize this notion of what it means to speak a language within the formal system. If Davidson imposes this definition of speaking a language within his formal system, he must apply it universally and without discrimination, something which leads to the aforementioned problems of a speaker of a language not speaking the language, and that of a non-speaker of a language having the capacity to speak the language.

A further theoretical issue arises from Davidson’s formal system. Davidson has set himself to show that all languages are mutually translatable and has constructed, via

adaptation of Tarski's Convention T, a manner in which to discuss translation from one language to another. Convention T was originally created in order to remove the Liar's Paradox. A theoretically interesting question is then: does Davidson's adaptation remove the paradox as well? The answer turns out to be negative. We come to see this via a process of iterating applications of Davidson's translation formula. Applying the formula a first time puts the notion of truth of a first language into a second language. The second application translates that notion of truth of the first language as found in the second language back into the first language.

We first suppose toward contradiction that all languages are indeed mutually translatable. If this is the case, then we note that any given utterance in a language may be translated into another language. More specifically, this supposition allows a language to be mutually translatable (directly or via a chain of translations between languages) with a language that has a notion of truth of the original language, thus necessarily allowing a notion of truth of a language within the language itself. To see this we demonstrate using two mutually translatable languages, one language denoted in bold the other denoted in italics. We start with an utterance in the italicized language:

Snow is white

Since the statement (1) is in a language which may be translated, we may construct a $(T^{**})_s$ statement using the language denoted in bold as the subject and metalanguage, treating the italicized statement as the statement in the object language. This yields:

'Snow is white' is true in Italics for p_o at time t_o if and only if snow is white for p_s at time t_s .

But (2) is a statement in the language denoted in bold, a language which is mutually translatable with the language denoted in italics. We may therefore construct a $(T^{**})_s$ statement using the language denoted in italics as the subject and metalanguage, treating the bolded statement as the statement in the object language. This yields:

'(2)' is true in Bold for p_o at time t_o if and only if $Trans(2)$ for p_s at time t_s

where '(2)' refers to that statement (2) as a statement in the language denoted in bold and $Trans(2)$ refers to the translation of the statement (2) from the language denoted in bold into the language denoted in italics. The important thing to note is that $Trans(2)$ contains both the names of statements of the language denoted in italics as well as a notion of truth of the language within the language. With these ingredients the language is considered to be semantically closed. As was remarked earlier, Tarski identifies the Liar's Paradox as originating from semantically closed languages. It is thus shown that Davidson's adaptation of Tarski's Convention T preserves the Liar's Paradox.

It can be argued that Tarski's aim is not the removal of paradoxes, but rather a systematized method of inter-lingual interpretation. While this is indeed the case, the existence of a paradox is enough to call any system into question. It is thus that the preservation of the Liar's Paradox, especially after the utilization of a technique very similar to one created for the eradication of the paradox, shows Davidson's system to rest on uneasy ground. While unsound on this theoretical basis, the method does seem to work in the same way that the common view of interpretations is understood: look and listen in order to try to figure out what the other person is saying. While language translation has clearly happened before, the exact process or system of understanding another language remains elusive.

Reflecting on the problematic evaluation of $(T^{**})_s$ statements and the preservation of the Liar's Paradox reveals that both problems vanish if the identification of the metalanguage and the subject language does not take place. For the evaluation problem, (T^{**}) sentences return to a separate metalanguage and therefore do not necessitate the capacity to evaluate on the part of the speaker of the subject language. Furthermore, the principle of charity Davidson supposes no longer becomes the evaluating criterion of a $(T^{**})_s$ statement, but rather simply gives the truth value of the left hand side of the bi-conditional in a (T^{**}) statement.

In regard to the preservation of the Liar's Paradox, the iterated application of translation brings a notion of truth of 'Language A' back into 'Language A' because the notion of truth for 'Language A' is contained within a mutually translatable 'Language B'. If the subject language and metalanguage are not identified, the notion of truth of mutually translatable languages necessarily lies in a metalanguage, a language of higher order, which is not mutually translatable with the lower order languages. The fact that these metalanguage statements discussing the truth of statements in lower order languages cannot be translated into those lower order languages prevents the notion of truth of a language from returning to a language. In short, this makes it such that languages of the same level are mutually translatable while the notion of truth of these languages necessarily lies in a higher-level language.

The problem with the lack of the identification of the metalanguage and subject language is that the sentences (T^{**}) have no way to be evaluated. Davidson essentially relies on the native speaker to verify for the translator that a correct translation has taken place. Without the identification of these languages, the formal system necessitates a speaker of the metalanguage to verify a correct translation has indeed occurred. Within the constraints of the formal system, this metalanguage is one which can speak of the verity of both the subject and object languages and must thus be a language of a higher order than those languages. Because natural languages do seem to be mutually translatable, all natural languages appear to be of the same order. In order

to evaluate such a metalanguage statement as (T**), a speaker of a higher order language is needed—something nowhere to be found.

If no such speaker of a metalanguage exists, we may never be able to truly understand what another is saying. While we can often get a good idea what another means when one speaks, it may be the case that this idea of meaning can at best asymptotically approach true understanding. If we can never understand something, then we cannot understand what it means to understand. If this is the case, all discussion of meaning and understanding will only leave the inquirers breathless and out of ideas on how to pin down these notions.

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